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TRANSNATIONAL TELEVISION

THE EUROVISION SONG CONTEST IN THE LIGHT OF RESEARCH

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“99 percent of the people you ask about it will profess to hate it, but they all love it really.”

(Katy Boyle, presenter of the Eurovision Song Contest in the 1960s and 1970s in the UK)

The Eurovision Song Contest (ESC), staged by the European Broadcasting Union, has been watched by 195 million viewers in 41 countries in 2014 (Eurovision, 2014). With this the ESC is a major issue to European Public Service Media and by far the most successful transnational entertainment format. Some observers would say it is the only one. So the question occurs, what is actually the secret of its success?

In fact, television across borders comes in different varieties. Of course there has always been inspill across borders, but the emergence of a globalized economy has also fed the idea of global television (Albarran & Chan-Olmsted, 1998; Gershon, 2006). Being a culturally bound product it became clear that television content is not easily globalized. Fictional content does cross borders in what some critics call cultural imperialism (Freedman, 2003) but for non-fiction there is hardly any global content. Even events that are distributed globally, such as the Olympic Games, are staged very differently in different countries. Thus one needs to scale back and discuss transnational television rather than global or international television (Chalaby, 2005).

Transnational television can mean three things in three contexts: First, and closest to the idea of globalized television, there could be transnational products, either in form of transnational channels that provide the same content in a number of countries or a transnational show that is aired identically in different countries (such as the ESC). Both concepts have proven problematic in the past and have largely been replaced by a third, that is the transnational TV format which is adapted to local

preferences whenever it crosses a border. Here the perspective is economic: reaping as much economies of scope (and scale¹) as possible without alienating national audiences. The ESC's product characteristics have been the subject of several discussions. Here, its nature as a serial format (Akin, 2013), family television product (Georgiou & Sandvoss, 2008), contest-type media event (Dayan & Katz, 1992) as well as its liveliness and international dispersal are the most essential characteristics of the ESC. In the light of transnationality, the ESC is a product that is partly adapted in the different markets by using local commentators giving the event a country-specific tone.

A second perspective in research on transnational formats is focused on the audience, i.e. on their reception and effects at the individual and group level. Especially in the context of the European Union, transnational TV has been discussed as a means to create a transnational European public sphere (Esser, 2008). As an example, Sandvoss (2008) explores the role of the ESC in creating and shaping a European identity by providing a space of illusory belonging. In contrast, Coleman (2008) considers the ESC as a moment of cultural embarrassment in the UK stating: “Paradoxically, while Eurovision seeks to invoke the imagery of a transcendental European culture, it actually reinforces national caricatures. The contest's amorphous internationalism draws attention to the reality of European cultural fragmentation, rivalry, and economic ambition. The failure of Eurovision songs to resonate universally only serves to accentuate their specificity.” (p. 131)

However, it has been argued that transnational formats contribute to the cohesion of a – transnational – society through sharing themes and through conveying values and norms (Vlašić, 2004, 2012). Here, entertainment content has an important integrating role (Vlašić & Brosius, 2002) as the public debates about respect and tolerance about the 2014 ESC winner Conchita Wurst convincingly showed (on constructions of non-heteronormativity at ESC see also Motschenbacher, 2013). In fact, a vast majority of research on the ESC focuses on the reception side emphasizing its role for personal or social identity work. As an example, in Lemish's (2004) study on the importance of the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) to the identity of gay Israeli men, many respondents point out the transnational feeling of connection the shared media experience creates as the contest is watched by a mutual community all over the world. The sense of connection, however, can be assumed to be the strongest for participants experiencing the content simultaneously exchanging their reactions to the media content by chatting on the phone or via the internet (Förster, Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2015). This collective experiencing may also take the form of a ritual for a social group. Audiences

may use specific formats as a special social event, an occasion to celebrate parties, to get together, enjoying refreshments and drinks, chatting, rating performances or betting on the results, as in the case of the ESC (Lemish, 2004). In summary it can be stated that transnational formats in general and the ESC in specific have an outstanding role for (1) personal identity work by providing a projection surface for own concepts of reality, (social) roles and the self, and for (2) social identity work by using the media content as a ‘campfire’ to strengthen in-group ties.

Third, we can observe a second level transnationalization of production cultures. While the product remains to be adapted to the national preferences, the adaptation is done by a “cosmopolitan tribe” (Kuipers, 2012) of professionals sharing a certain ethos and taste. Transnationality in production can thus find expression in internationally diverse production teams and in a high international mobility of single actors resulting in a ‘transnational attitude’ and convergence of production conventions. This perspective on transnationality in television has been neglected by research so far. As an exception, Akin (2013) interviewed musicians and producers who have been involved in the production of Turkey’s contribution to the ESC. He found that the actors’ views are vastly different from the dominant discourses about the ESC in Turkey. In more detail, they experience the ESC mostly as a competition but also as “an occasion for creating international bonds (mostly on interpersonal levels) not by watching the program but by getting involved in the production of the ESC event” (p. 2317).

Looking at the ESC as the most successful transnational format from these three perspectives – i.e. the production, the product and the reception – allows to better understand the antecedents of its attainments and to grasp its effects beyond pure data of reach and market shares. Moreover, this multi-perspective approach also provides a systematic, differentiated approach to evaluate the ESCs’ contribution to the public value of European Public Service Media. •

¹ As an example, the Austrian Millionenshow is being produced in the television studio of its German equivalent Wer wird Millionär.

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